

# Constructing Indianness in Kent MacKenzie's *The Exiles*

By Carol Burns

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Carol Burns

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**Overview of Content:**

Acknowledgements .....	3
Introduction .....	5
Chapter One, <i>The Exiles</i> and Federal Relocation Policy .....	12
Chapter Two, Filming <i>The Exiles</i> .....	19
Chapter Three, An analysis of <i>The Exiles</i> / T-birds .....	29
Chapter Four, What <i>The Exiles</i> means today .....	41
Notes .....	48
Bibliography .....	53

## Introduction

By focusing on a sloshed night-in-the-life of this group, Mackenzie locates urban malcontent rather than inventing it. Mackenzie wasn't a native Angeleno, much less an American Indian, but his outsider perspective enlarges *THE EXILES*...A true preservationist whose work has now been treated in kind. <sup>1</sup> -- Max Goldberg, San Francisco Bay Guardian

Kent Mackenzie was a University of Southern California film student when he began filming a script with the working title “The Trail of the Thunderbird” in the Bunker Hill neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. Three years later, in 1961, the film was finally completed and renamed *The Exiles*. In his thesis Mackenzie says that he had made no prior agreements with distributors and once seen, exhibitors and distributors considered the film to be difficult. Mackenzie, hoping to attract attention to the film, sent it to Europe where it screened in Venice, Edinburgh, Mannheim and London before returning to the San Francisco Film Festival. In Mackenzie’s lifetime *The Exiles* never measured up to his expectations; it was never theatrically screened or broadcast on American television, only one unnamed 16 mm distributor stepped up to release the film for non-theatrical use in Australia, Poland and Belgium. Over the next few years the film was occasionally screened on university campuses and soon disappeared from public view, however bootleg copies of copies were reported to have circulated among some academics interested in the new field of American Indian Studies. <sup>2</sup>

Filmmaker and critic Thom Anderson is often credited for the discovery and re-emergence of Mackenzie’s film after “excavating and annotating” over 200

assorted film clips for his 3-hour epic documentary essay film, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003). Evan Kindley writing for the website “Not Coming to a Theatre Near You” interviewed Anderson about his role in unearthing *The Exiles*, “Well, I don’t know exactly what my role was. *The Exiles*, like *Killer of Sheep*, was a film that was always hiding in plain sight. It was being distributed by the University of California Extension Media Center; they just did an indifferent job of it. They sold low-quality VHS copies. But there was a good print of the film in the USC Moving Image Archive Collection, which Jon Stout at Los Angeles Film Forum screened in the early 1990s. And David James at USC screened it around 1999. So there was this chain. I didn’t discover *The Exiles*, by any means. People here knew about it. One thing that did happen was, when my movie came out, some people outside of the city showed programs based around it. So while the earlier screenings of *The Exiles* were mostly in Los Angeles, in the wake of *Los Angeles Plays Itself* it was also shown in other places all over the world. So other people discovered it, and a lot of critics were really impressed by it.”<sup>3</sup>

In 2008 Milestone Films in association with Sherman Alexie and Charles Burnett released a restored version of *The Exiles* and included with the DVD package the original press kit, Mackenzie’s M.A. thesis, audio interviews and commentary. These primary source materials reveal Kent Mackenzie’s motivations and filmmaking process. For example, in his M.A. thesis filed in June of 1964, Mackenzie offers this statement of purpose: “To describe step by step the production of *The Exiles* – an attempt to express the inner emotional patterns of a group of young American Indians by filming the details of their actual lives.”

The thesis and production notes document the ever-shifting relationship between the director and the actor-subjects, during the almost two and a half years of filming. His production notes from April 19, 1960 state:

If there was one thing that all Indians that I met had in common it was a certain type of confusion that was hard to describe in words but could be caught on film. One of the reasons that this confusion seemed attractive was that because although it was different and specific it was also related to confusion in me, and I suppose, the whole society. That this particular group seemed to be a classic illustration of this emotional confusion. Ideally this would be a film in which you understood or felt from the point of view of these people, not from our point of view. Description of confusion: confused, disoriented, self-destructive, clannish, immature, escapist, lack of mature consistent objectives, anti-social.”<sup>4</sup>

By the time *The Exiles* was in the can, the Bunker Hill neighborhood where the filming had taken place no longer existed. The area had been gentrified and Indians along with the Mexicans, and low-income older white folk, melted into the American pot, drifted back home, ended up in jail or buried in the grave. Both *The Exiles* and its precursor *Bunker Hill* - Mackenzie's first film - show a piece of the past that now exists only in memory and on celluloid. The untold story that comes from both of these films is the displacement of families that occurred once demolition took place. And no matter how beautiful and haunting *The Exiles* appears to be, there is a deeper and darker haunting at the heart of it, the stereotypical expectation of the drunken Indian. Mackenzie's filmic



representation of the group of young urban Indians constructs a people distanced from their tribal ties and cultural traditions, resulting in the dissolution and neglect of family, shared responsibility of bad influence, meager hopes and monumental failings. Mackenzie saw the Indian problem not as being part of the Federal Indian Relocation program or even of the Termination Policies of the 1950's, but of something more insidious, a Native American sabotage and failure to successfully assimilate by their own hand, through their own self-destruction. His notes reflect he felt that his subjects did not take his labors as seriously as he did, and that their personal deficiencies jeopardized his vision.

A vast majority of critics and audiences regard *The Exiles* as a documentary film, Mackenzie himself calls *The Exiles* a documentary, albeit "lightly directed." This thesis offers an examination of *The Exiles* and the documents surrounding its production, publicity, and reception using methods of indigenous film theory. Further, I will deconstruct this film to show that *The Exiles* a docu-fiction. I argue that these archival documents and my reading of the film itself demonstrate that Mackenzie constructed for his actor-subjects an image of Indianness that little to do with themselves as individual Indian people, and everything to do with Mackenzie's own personal construction of Indianness. These constructions go beyond filmic representations and stereotyping and questions of political correctness to the control of the actor-subjects' behavior on and off set by providing alcohol, setting up fights, and providing bail money.

Mackenzie stated that he was motivated to "aid the Indian" and fairly represent the Bunker Hill Indians. Unfortunately *The Exiles*, a neorealist noir-

esque film that frames the source of Mackenzie's social dis-ease as the urban underbelly of America, unmanaged and outside of federal control, is a biased affirmation of the cultural coding that defines Mackenzie's non-native projection of "an Indigenous life way that is not true of all but of many." It is an affirmation that is supported through its endorsement by contemporary Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian author Sherman Alexie in the Milestone re-release.

The problem Indians faced in the 1950's was hundreds of years in the making and the culmination of paternalistic federal policies had been set in motion long ago, compromising tribal autonomy. It was this history that paved the way for the termination of tribes and the relocation of Indians to urban areas. But for Mackenzie there existed another and far greater Indian problem, the commercial viability of a documentary about relocated San Carlos Apache Indian families to Los Angeles, California. Thus Mackenzie abandoned the idea of filming mothers and fathers, grandparents and children who go to school, to work, to church, who spend quality time together in the urban reservation of Bunker Hill. His urban Indian characters reinforce his idea of "a certain type of confusion," a condition Mackenzie illustrates in the harshest of light on the edge of darkness.

He abandoned the idea of developing further any substantive text examining federal Indian policy and instead chose three people to represent victims of themselves. And chose a series of events that occurred over a period of three years combined to form one night on film. Mackenzie even included his own experiences with Indians to define this night of the constructed Indian. The

only hint of documentary realism or truth comes from the poorly lit shots over the shoulders of Indians from a short distance away - the intertribal drumming on Hill X. To what extent can *The Exiles* be said to be an authentic representation of the Native American urban experience with limited collaboration with Indigenous colleagues? Were the concerns of Indians involved in the film production addressed? Were they allowed input? What does this artifact have to offer when considering the concepts of authorship and representation, visual and rhetorical sovereignty? What do these artifacts have to offer in the decolonization of narratives?

## **Chapter 1, *The Exiles* and the Federal Relocation Policy**

Kent Mackenzie was a student at USC when he conceived of a noble idea for a documentary that would shed light on and show the effects of paternalism on relocatees living in the Bunker Hill area of Los Angeles, California during the Federal Relocation Policy period that began in 1954. In order to understand the federal policies of termination and relocation in the 1950's and the climate in which Kent Mackenzie found himself a part of, it is important to retrace the historical relationship between tribal nations and the federal government between Indian and non-Indian.

In the coastal region of Southern California in the present day Los Angeles area these tribal nations exist: Chumash, Kitanemuk, Gabrielino, Luiseno, Cahuilla, and the Kumeyaay, and there are hundreds more tribes up and down the coast. America is an Indigenous place, full of Indigenous people. Over five hundred tribal nations still exist and the United States is bound to each as sovereigns – a marriage acknowledged through treaty (and other acts of congress). The Discovery of America resulted in the dispossession of aboriginal homelands from Indigenous nations by colonization.

Treaties are the legal instruments by which the federal government took Indian land. In 1810 the Supreme Court of the United States, Justice John Marshall endorsed the doctrine of preemption in *Fletcher v. Peck*, which held that the nature of Indian title is to be respected until it exists no more. The doctrine of preemption established that the rights to territories were divided in two classes, the fee-simple right of absolute dominion over the land and the right of

occupancy. Justice Marshall in 1823 expanded the justification of claims to Indigenous lands in Johnson and Graham's *Lessee v. McIntosh*, giving the United States the power to extinguish the Indian right of occupancy.<sup>5</sup>

Translation - the nature of federal Indian policies is the separation of the Indian from the land by any means necessary. The more humane treatments were geared toward assimilating Indians into American society and into the market place via education through mission, boarding and industrial training schools. Many a story's been told of the child who returned home only to find that his experiences in the white man's world had changed him; once away from family, community, and culture the Indian assumed the characteristics and identity of white America. However the tendency to categorize that all instances of assimilation have been by force has led to the characterization of the Indian as victim. Other archetypal characterizations of Native Americans not necessarily related to assimilation but definitely to relocation have been the Indian as savage. Either way representations of Indians showed the Indian beaded, feathered and often untouched by modernity. This is not the case in Mackenzie's film, however he does state in his thesis that his actors had never seen a white face before, as if in the post-WWII America there were still pristine tribes existing insitu.

The 1934 Indian Reorganization Act and World War II profoundly affected the lives of Native Americans. The U.S. was becoming much more urban: In the 1940 Census, a little over half of all Americans (56.5 percent) were living in cities. In 1940, only around 8 percent of Indians were living in cities.<sup>6</sup> In 1952, the

federal government initiated the Urban Indian Relocation Program. Relocation offices were set up in Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Jose, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Cleveland and Dallas. It is estimated that as many as 750,000 Native Americans migrated to the cities between 1950 and 1980. Some came through the Relocation program and others came on their own. The relocatees were provided temporary housing, employment opportunities, a weekly stipend, and were teamed up with religious organizations to promote middle-class, Christian values of temperance and propriety "in order that they might aid in the orientation and assimilation of the Indian."<sup>7</sup> Relocation eligibility requirements were spelled out in a memo by Charles Miller to All Field Relocation Officers that said, "...a number of factors might limit the potential of a candidate for becoming a success and thus disqualifying their application for relocation, including advanced age, physical defects and abnormalities, educational limitations, oversized families, degree of ability to speak and read English, penal records, dishonorable military discharge, history of excessive alcohol use, and heavy debts."<sup>8</sup> Mary Nan Gamble Los Angeles Field Relocation Office (LAFRO) director complained one year earlier of undesirables sent to LA jeopardizing the whole program.

Many program participants were not able to realize the middle-class life promoted by relocation officials, but found the city difficult and alienating. For some of the Indians on relocation, this combination of loneliness, alienation, urban poverty, and frustration over diminishing opportunities for work translated into great and emotional pain, leading them into homelessness, addiction, and

incarceration. These Indians spent much of their time drifting between streets, Indian bars, hospitals, and local jails.<sup>9</sup> Certain parts of Los Angeles became known as gathering sites for these homeless Indians, such as Main Street and downtown's Skid Row. H. Brown, a Winnebago Indian from Nebraska, remembered spending much of the 1950s in Los Angeles "running around" with a group of Indians, hanging out in Indian bars such as The Ritz and The Columbine, taking free meals at downtown missions, and sleeping on the streets.<sup>10</sup> Other Indians ventured to "Hill X" in Chavez Ravine or "The Tombs," an area underneath the intersection of the 5 and 110 freeways, where they gathered to beat drums and sing songs. While these places may have offered a sense of community and familiarity for Indians brought to the city on relocation, they also could be places of despair frequently marked by alcohol, drugs, and violence.<sup>11</sup>

Former Principle Chief of the Cherokee Nation, Wilma Mankiller recalled her firsthand experience with the Relocation Program in San Francisco: Large numbers of Americans began to move en masse from reservations and ancestral lands to targeted metropolitan areas in anticipation of receiving job training, education, and a new place to live. My own family experienced the pain of United States government relocation. The year was 1956. It was one month before my eleventh birthday. That was when the time came for our Trail of Tears.

12

But that isn't the only storyline or moral to take away from this period of relocation. There are thousands of stories untold that are equally as tragic as well as those that inspire. Stories of elders, families and children, of the single women

who were denied accommodation for training because in America women were housewives. Stories of success and affirmation of cultural identity, of Indians taking advantage of program benefits on their own terms. Stories of Indians navigating this highly regulated, neurotic system and standing up to disciplinary action and total paternalistic control.

Indians came to the cities to forge a better life and instead were met with the iron fist of Uncle Sam and spying relocation agents who documented their every move, who sent Indians home to the reservation disgraced for “being bad” or for simply taking matters into their own hands when the program promises failed to materialize and left them stranded away from home, culture and family. Reactions to paternalism ranged from savvy system working, refusal to yield, and branching out doing something on their own like the Tafoya family: without permission took a holiday at the beach and decided to live there, they were labeled as uncooperative. The following year LAFRO announced that the family had “done wonderfully well for themselves . . . due to their own determination.”<sup>13</sup>

The history of allotment, boarding schools, and other policies of Americanization should have made clear that any program that sought to eliminate Indian identity in favor of a narrowly defined American ideal was going to fail in its stated intentions and have a tragic consequences for Indian people.<sup>14</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s a transition was occurring in federal Indian policy and an activist movement was building among reservation and urban Indian communities. Indians across the country worked to focus attention on the problems of Indians and to demand fundamental changes in government



programs and federal Indian policy. In the end, changes in favor of including “the Indian” perspective and the contracting of services by Indians for Indians was the shift toward self-determination which meant abandoning BIA policy based on paternalism and increasing the control Indians had over their own communities, while continuing to hold the federal government to its historical obligations to Indian people. Beginning with the Kennedy administration, this idea of self-determination took root with policy-makers and gained momentum to become a force in U.S. – Indian relations.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of *The Exiles*, Mackenzie’s non-native interpretation without the benefit of Indigenous collaboration and consensus mirrors the paternalism, commodification and regulation of Indians by the United States. Commodification of Indigeneity continues to be a point of contention and an impetus for Indigenous visual sovereignty through media activism and more. President Jefferson Keel of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) remarked that history teaches that failure to include the voices of tribal leaders in formulating policy affecting our communities has all too often led to undesirable and, at times, devastating results, such as federal policies that led to allotment of our lands, termination of tribal governments, and relocation of our families to urban areas. By contrast, where dialogue with Indian nations had a meaningful role in the policy making process, we have enjoyed greater opportunities and have been better able to address important challenges. This dialogue is a critical ingredient of a sound and productive federal-tribal relationship.<sup>16</sup> The same logic also applies to

concerns involving intellectual property rights of the Indigenous and those interactions between individuals.

## CHAPTER 2, Filming the Exiles

The film [also] belongs to an exceptionally creative moment in American independent-film history. Viewed today, *The Exiles*, despite the anomaly of its refined cinematography, has much in common with independent films made during the period—Robert Frank’s *Pull My Daisy* and John Cassavetes’s *Shadows* (both 1959) in particular, as well as films by Shirley Clarke, Jonas Mekas, Sidney Meyers, Lionel Rogosin, and Morris Engel. These filmmakers were staking out the terrain of an American neorealism, using nonprofessionals or fledgling actors who played characters very like themselves. The blend of fictional and documentary elements applied to every aspect of production.<sup>17</sup>

Amy Taubin, “Minority Report,” Art Forum

Making do with a disembodied auto headlight powered by a car battery Mackenzie’s production crew did whatever was needed to pierce the inky darkness with white light, drawing out the natural chiaroscuro of city streets and Indians in shadow. Mackenzie’s crew shot *The Exiles* in the dark of night using existing source lights from the gas station, the liquor store, light pouring from the storefronts, the tunnel and from the beer joints. The only daylight Mackenzie has use for is a hazy late afternoon sun and the diffuse gray of an early misty dawn. This independent film reflects the middle-class privilege afforded to USC film school students such as Kent Mackenzie and crew. This brotherhood and the associations that he made while skirting the alleys of Hollywood studios and documentary production houses, gave him access to supplies, equipment, talented crew and the support of a film community.

He described his 1961 film as a 72-minute documentary of one anguished night in the lives of three young American Indians who left their reservations to live in downtown Los Angeles. His vision was two-fold: express inner emotional

patterns of human beings and his contempt for the Hollywood system's escapist simplicity and documentary filmmakers "oversimplified solutions to complex social situations". Mackenzie thought that everything pushed for artificial and pretentious effect, and what he wanted to pioneer was gritty, hard-core, boots on the street, realism. *The Exiles* is an ethnographic film that is both a theatrical and a documentary, a combination that allows for a greater viewer appeal. Mackenzie said in his thesis, "In looking back at the rejection of conventional methods and structures, which was part of the motivation for *The Exiles*, I can see many similarities with our present feelings...we were following the only true road to a 'natural form' of film, and we were contemptuous of all other paths or accomplishments." <sup>18</sup>

His thesis and other documents and interview extras available in the Milestone DVD collection provides an almost complete overview of his filmic process from start to finish and includes Mackenzie's personal and research notes, plus a large volume of technical production information. When he completed the film in 1961, included in the package was a press kit with information relating to each phase of production.

In the fall of 1954 Kent Mackenzie was working on his initial treatment for his USC Cinema 415 class project, a documentary film "designed to provoke critical thinking about the rehabilitation of slum areas." He completed *Bunker Hill* in 1956. Within the following year he would begin working on another film. A remarkable similarity exists between the initial treatment for *Bunker Hill* and *The Exiles* script, a comparison shows that Mackenzie switched Yvonne for the old

man who shuffles down Bunker Hill past Angels Flight to the Grand Central Market, past the vendors filling bags with produce and display signs on bins, people milling about, close-ups and cutaway, and the old man (later, Yvonne) trudges back uptown past Angels Flight, carrying brown paper sacks back to the geriatric (later, Indian) commune.

The original idea to make documentary that would shed light on the Federal Indian Relocation policy and show the effects of paternalism on relocatees living in the Bunker Hill area of LA never did pan out. Kent's investigation into the "Indian problem" was topical and he asserted that the problem Indians faced was an internal one and also wrote, "I think that all legal issues, government programs, etc. can be dispensed with; for one thing perhaps a real raw materials film rather than showing, for instance, the separation between Indian and government, will when shown to the Bureau make clear this separation."

In fact, so focused was he on exploiting only one narrow aspect of his experience, that the San Carlos Apache family he mentions in his original script "Thunderbird, American Indian Film Outline 12/22/57," on disappears, in fact no other of case histories were explored. And he cut out everything except "the one group on Main Street." He took out the first sequence at the Greyhound bus station that introduces a relocated Indian family, the mother, father, and 6 – 8 kids, removed the responsible brother-in-law of Homer who goes home to wife and 2 kids. And took out the scene where a young Apache mother with her year old daughter in arms, calls out her husband from the Ritz. <sup>19</sup>

Sometime before the fall of 1956 Kent spent one month researching the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs Relocation Program “with a week’s visit to the San Carlos Apache, Gila River, and Papago Reservations in Arizona.” His 11-page funding proposal is littered with facts and figures gleaned from his urgent research. This detailed funding proposal, a precursor to the T-Birds script months later, identified the people involved, pinpointed the area to be investigated and outlined the trouble. It also included shot ideas, and interview prospects that may or may not have been imaginary:

“There’s a family here somewhere that we’d like to film – a father who used to ride the lines in the tribal cattle cooperative before the drouth, a mother who never got beyond the six grades of the government school but wants her 13 year old son and two younger daughters to go to public high school. Stevens could be their name – it’s a common Apache name, although it doesn’t sound very romantic for a warrior tribe. Mr. Stevens’ father can remember when the great war chiefs walked the reservation, and both father and son know that the United States Government never defeated them. They are proud and distrustful of the white man; their attitude is to wait and see about the promises, and you can feel this as you talk to them. Sometimes you feel that they would like to spit in your eye. They do not have any middle-class illusions about education – they want their children to go to the white man’s school so that they will not be outsmarted by the white man. Mr. Stevens does not wear his hair long, or ride bareback, or have a scar down his left cheek; he is proud of his levis and pointed (toe riding) boots, and he slouches and tilts his Stetson to cover his eyes in the

hot sun like anyone else. But inside he is of another culture, of another way of thought and life; he looks off into the distance when he talks, and his gestures are of the bigness of the land.”<sup>20</sup>

For three pages Mackenzie goes on and on describing in great detail this family’s past, present and future, “In a few months they must discard most of 25 – 50 centuries of native custom and belief; they must move from the moon to Los Angeles.” Even though this proposal was turned down for funding Kent’s determination could not be swayed, he started on his script anyway, eventually incorporating some of the concepts from the funding proposal into the final project.

According to Mackenzie, in July 1957, Charles A. Palmer, president of Parthenon Pictures and his employer at the time, encouraged him to research a film on the state of the American Indian today. He visited the San Carlos Indian Reservation searching for answers but decided that the city, not the reservation was where his story lay. Trolling the Indian bars downtown, Kent spent long hours making friends and earning the confidence of Indians who finally agreed to re-enact a segment of their lives for this picture. Their trust did not come easily. As he stated in an interview with Film Quarterly in the spring of 1962, “They accepted me. I wasn’t an outsider. After I wrote the script, I came down and told them what I wanted to do. I introduced the crew to them every time we came down here. We had to work it so it wasn’t like working, or they wouldn’t have done it. They’re really not interested in money. It was more important that we’d promised them a party.”<sup>21</sup> Each of the members of the crew — the cameramen,

the production men, and the sound men had to be introduced separately to the prospective cast. To prepare the cast for the time when the lights and the camera would be bearing down on them, Kent Mackenzie took a sound-recorder and a microphone into the bars and into their apartments, pre-enacted scenes and played back their recorded voices and statements for their approval. At no time, he told his Indian friends, were they to voice anything or do anything that was not natural to their actual living situation. According to Mackenzie a shooting script written with the cooperation of the cast, and the Indians improvising their own dialogue, *The Exiles* would then, when it reached the screen, accurately reflect the 14-hour period in the lives of the relocatees.

\* \* \* \* \*

**From:** “I really began to dig these people and to spend a great many hours with them, I began to identify very strongly with them, I loved these people and admired their lack of restraint.”<sup>22</sup>

**To:** “Finally in April 1959, shot final sequence. By the time we had struggled through this dance on the hill, which is one of the poorer sequences in the film, I was absolutely fed up with the whole project. I had been living with the Indians so long that I was beginning to dislike them. But we tried to keep moving.”<sup>23</sup>

Mackenzie worked on this film from 1957 – 1961 and wrote his thesis in 1964. Notice the language he uses throughout to describe the project, his motivation, the character of the non-actors and the politics of their lives. The racist language that pepper Mackenzie’s thesis and scripts are telling of Kent



Mackenzie's dangerous preconceptions about Native America that color the outcome of *The T-Birds / Exiles* going in. Consider these examples:

"When we shot the dance on the hill, we found that we had a crew of thirty-five volunteers, many of whom were probably qualified to be directors of photography, writers, or editors. They all cheerfully lugged equipment, loaded magazines, guarded the liquor cache against Indian raids, or picked up hamburgers and coffee for the midnight breaks." <sup>24</sup>

And,

"It was difficult in particular to get past these successful, assimilated, English-speaking individuals to find out what the average Indian was like . . . to get to the people . . . who do not . . . know that they are a problem . . . just want to live and drink and bear children. No one ever hears from them because they may not speak English. But going to a meeting of a number of tribes you will soon see that these orators do not come to listen or really to solve anything, but just to feel sorry for themselves, but just to beat their heads against the wailing wall and when you talk to one who has come enough out of the common tribal group to the point that he is a speaker or writer, you will find that he will often have a great contempt for the people of his own tribe who have not raised themselves by their moccasin thongs, as he did." <sup>25</sup>

And,

"The worst problems came in the mob scenes where there had been a great deal of drinking. The dance on the hill was almost another Custer's last

stand, and the poor quality of the footage is in large part due to the wild conditions under which it was shot. From the very first moments of the evening there was a constant struggle to control the liquor consumption, to protect the equipment, to break up fights, and generally to keep everyone's mind on the scenes for the film. The arrival of dawn found scattered brawls all over the hilltop and me trying to dissuade one of the singers from attacking the camera crew with a large rock in each hand. If it hadn't been for the efforts of the principle cast members, there probably would have been another historic disaster for the palefaces." <sup>26</sup>

Mackenzie manipulated the story in order to produce the results that he envisioned through "A system of percentage ownership and deferred payment," that he set up for both the crew and cast, contingent upon sale of the film: "Except for a token sum for the shooting of the last sequence, the Indians did not receive any money. Instead they were compensated with food, alcohol, and help with personal problems. During the first year of production eight percent of the total budget was spent on beer and wine, and I spent many hours trying to unravel the turbulent lives of the cast. Time and time again major or minor characters were bailed out of jail while the crew stood waiting to shoot some had to return to their reservations for awhile, and several spent long terms in jail. Three of the six Indian men who appear in the first supper sequence in the finished film were sent up for long terms and lost to the production for good. One of them had been chosen for a major part. Two prospective cast members had to leave town to avoid the police immediately before the production was actually

started. Characters had their features changes in fights, or the costumes they were supposed to wear in the film ripped from their limbs in brawls, or stolen while they lay drunk.<sup>27</sup>

Mackenzie was invested in the images of Indians that he wrote into the script; during production he took measures to ensure that his point of view would not be compromised, and they nudged the boundary of ethics violations. For example, "The guy we brought in for the [*staged*] fight scene in the Columbine Café was someone whom Homer did not like and would have fought anyway. My taste for naturalism had evidently gone a little too far."<sup>28</sup> Yes Mackenzie had gone too far, on numerous occasions, throwing a free beer party to troll for action, replacing Yvonne's real husband with Homer, to name a few. Outside of that the production was a typical venture that progressed through these stages: scripting, photography, voice recording, editing, adding music and sound effects and finally, the release.

The film was lighted, directed and photographed by a group of young Hollywood filmmakers. Much of the picture was shot on "short ends," the leftovers of 1,000-foot rolls (varying from 100 to 300 feet of stock) discarded by major film producers. In the end, nearly 55,000 feet of stock was exposed, to be edited into approximately 7,000 feet of finished negative. In order to assure full attendance of the cast and the extras at the long nights of shooting, unit-manager-sound-man Sam Farnsworth instituted a system whereby marked poker chips were doled out to the habitués of the bar, each chip redeemable for a bottle of beer. With this incentive, the background extras who stayed until the legal

closing time of 2:00 am remained within camera range for all the bar sequences.

29

In the Milestone 2009 Press Kit Cameraman Erik Daarstad recalls making *The Exiles*, “The original title of the film was Thunderbird. I cannot remember how it got that title — probably because it had something to do with an Indian icon. Ironically, Thunderbird was also the name of a very cheap, sweet Gallo wine (at that time 89¢ a bottle) that the Indians used to drink. It was not until late 1959 or 1960 that the film title was changed to *The Exiles*. Every sequence was carefully planned out . . . although that is not to say we did not take advantage of opportunities as they came along . . . the film originally did not have the current prologue of Edward S. Curtis still photographs, but Kent decided later that it needed something to set the stage.”

### Chapter 3 - An analysis of The Exiles / T-birds

Even in the city, there are reservations. The bar of choice, the Ritz, is a shrunken Native American nation where the displaced tribesmen meet before retiring to smaller groups and private spaces.<sup>30</sup>

- - Jim Ridley, "Soul and the City: Kent Mackenzie's The Exiles"

In this underworld of dark seedy beer joints, the marginalized ridiculous in their proclivities - queue Indians (and cameo queers) – perform within the space of Kent Mackenzie's frame. Their value lies in the hyper real as entertainment or propaganda as contrived exiles banished from their people. The scope of the original film proposal was so overwhelming that Mackenzie removed from the script all three relocation case history families and zoomed in for a close-up on a handful of young Indians who were exploring the boundaries of their urban experience. While the film may have started out as a documentary idea it became a representation of the truth of their lives through the manipulation of fact. Michael Chanan asks, "Does this mean that all truth is relative? What about documentaries that are intended not as propaganda at all, but say, as essays in poetic expression or didactic demonstrations of scientific findings? There are traps in these questions, like the assumption that poetry, truth and propaganda are mutually exclusive categories, which of course is no more true of documentary than it is of fiction."<sup>31</sup>

Mackenzie believed that if he rejected conventional methods and structures that he would be following the only true road to a "natural form" of film, the raw and the real, and his subject would be the young Indians of Bunker Hill,

“Perhaps the big danger is that we are presenting a group of Indians who are a minority because they have made a choice to come to the city, and are unfortunately not the ideal American sunrise-over-the-Grand-Canyon minority, but are the group who indulge in the actions that any sensationalistic producer would pick on. Our job then is to really work with these guys to the point that we can show what makes them tick.”<sup>32</sup>

What did make them tick? Mackenzie never answered this question but he did present the behaviors of a few Indian people who were on the periphery of the highly regulated and monitored federal relocation program, a representative slice of the ones who either came to the city on their own or were booted from the program for acting foolish. Either way, not being part of the program means dodging a watchful gaze, the perfect place for rebels. In an attempt to provoke an answer to his question Mackenzie selected certain representative events that occurred over a period of three years, the time it took for him to become “one of them”, experiences from an untold number of Indian individuals and mixed it with his own experiences, sifted and combined them to create a reality that didn’t naturally exist in space and time. Does this make the representations of urban Indians in *The Exiles* false, exaggerations?

Mackenzie said that “every incident and scene in this picture has to back up the theme of confusion that I see in all these people, and even if a guy is doing well in terms of our own economic and social values it should be clear that all is not as rosy as you might think within his soul.” And from that moment the stereotypes Kent McKenzie claimed to be smashing were his capitalization. He

shows the Indian male (represented by Tommy and Homer) as worthless or wolfish, shiftless opportunists, and the females as (mostly) silent and stoic. Incidentally, originally, Yvonne was played by Ivana but according to Mackenzie, Ivana left the production suddenly and without explanation and she was replaced by Yvonne. To what degree was Ivana's story superimposed on Yvonne's scripted voice-over narrative? Because in the original script, the arc of events doesn't change except for the discarding of three Relocation family case histories.

This picture is about Mackenzie himself, the film his pilgrims process, his own ideas and perceptions, how he felt about urban Indians and his disillusionment with them. So besides making a film he was also solving the Indian problem, and he spent hours and hours trying to help these Indians sort out their problems, especially Homer and his problems. Mackenzie's relationship to his subject was a tenuous one, for Mac it was love and hate. I'm sure it must've been, to some degree, the same for "the Thunderbirds" with regard to Mackenzie - he didn't discuss it in any case.

In November 1957 when Mackenzie first wrote down his idea of a documentary on the Indians he titled it *The Trail of the Thunderbird*, the preliminary script listed these themes to explore: boredom, confusion, what's the use of planning, not really so tough, loneliness, unreliability, tremendous drinking capacity, stick togetherness, loss of own cultural values, lack of any values from us, contempt for authority, amazing resistance of these people to our culture, amazing adherence to tradition of some of these people still, city group are a

minority, cruelty of this society to women, moments of kindness in this bored society, and nothing to look forward to.

Everything had to back up the confusion he saw in these people, but the Thunderbirds were not a static people locked in time. Mackenzie had to do something to keep the status quo so the picture could be finished to his specifications and his narrow view of the situation; he became a provocateur, supplying his subjects with booze and setting up the on-screen action to conform to his ideas. Mackenzie gave Homer a different life onscreen, as the husband of Yvonne's character. Yvonne was married to Cliff but Mackenzie said Homer played better on film. So who was Homer Nish? Did he have his own family tucked away somewhere? Were those really his folks in the reservation scene? What do these constructions say about Mackenzie's relationship to his subject?

In the Milestone DVD collection are a series of commentaries and analysis by Sherman Alexie, Charles Burnett, Sean Axmaker and Dennis Doros. I watched the film several times, with and without the additional presenters commentary:

**Moderator:** What is "presented by" mean?

**Sherman Alexie:** You should ask Dennis that. Of course Charles Burnett being one of the great directors of our time, we know why he's presenting it. Me? I'm the Indian." Everyone laughs.

Later in that same commentary program the moderator says that of the original non-actors in the film Homer died in 1982. Dennis Doros said, "there are



no extensive records but that because of all their smoking, drinking and jail – their life expectancy is low they are probably all dead.” And the moderator laughs. Alexie has no response. I mention this because of the dimension these bonus tracks add to understanding the filmmaker and his process, as well as the relationship this 50-year old document has with modern audiences regarding modes of Indigenous representation.

The following audio commentary occurred during the “Dear Homer” scene that opens with the neon Royal Liquor sign: Homer standing beneath the sign passes change to Ricco for a bottle, while waiting outside Homer reads a letter from home. Mackenzie gets close to showing Homer’s inner life with the introduction of the Arizona family footage (not translated to English) bookended with dissolve transitions. Notice Homer’s gaze directly into the camera just before he and Ricco walk off toward the tunnel. In that moment, as an audience we can see that Homer is not just some character creation of Mackenzie, he is a sentient being and he probably had to get up early for work the next morning and was ready to call it a night. Once again, the DVD commentary:

**Sean Axmaker:** And there he is back, his friend coming out with the . . .

**Sherman Alexie:** With the booze.

**Sean Axmaker:** Yeah. I don’t know if you knew this, the working title of the film was the *Trail of the Thunderbird* and then it was just called *Thunderbird* . . .

**Sherman Alexie:** Aaahhh

**Sean Axmaker:** Being a reference to both, kind of the iconography, but also to the cheap fortified wine . . .

**Sherman Alexie:** Rising out of the ashes, Thunderbird wine.

**Sean Axmaker:** And the title *The Exiles* didn't come about until they were finished shooting I believe.

**Sherman Alexie:** Ahh

In the next scene entitled "Double Crisp" Ricco is arguing with his wife Julia for the rent money. In the background on a tiny television there is gunfire and garbled voices of western cowboys. Homer and Ricco leave the apartment, passing the bottle they make their way along dark cavernous streets and the off screen audio accompanying this moment is the TV Western - a cowboy says, "Gimme your pocketknife," other cowboys are laughing and the man says, "I reckon that'll teach the moonfaced Injuns to have more respect for their feathers." I think that Kent placed this clip here for a reason, to show his disillusionment with urban Indians. The only Alexie comment to that scene was this: "I love that T.V. being on, I mean this was very early on in the T.V. era, right? Before it became ubiquitous?"

Meanwhile back at the Ritz Tommy is hustling the ladies, grabbing at Mary's purse and grabbing at Claudia. Mackenzie comments that he was shocked that Claudia didn't have any more self-respect than to sit down with these guys. Tommy's got his paws all of her and he's charming her, when that doesn't work he grabs Claudia's face roughly and says, "C'mon will you, you

gonna come or not?” And drags her by the arm to the jukebox. Sean Axmaker and Sherman Alexie on the DVD audio extras commented here:

**Sean Axmaker:** That guy is a jerk

**Sherman Alexie:** Oh yeah. See, one of the, when you are making films about historically underrepresented characters one of the problems, one of the artistic problems you face is when you portray somebody in a negative fashion, this guy is in some sense the villain of the movie and there is so much baggage associated with that and when you're a member of that race making that movie you can catch so much grief for portraying anything negatively. I think Mackenzie certainly had an advantage in the sense that he was a complete outsider. I doubt those issues ever occurred to him or at least on some levels where he, he felt like he was indicting himself. Uh, y'know, when you're a member of that culture making a film you can't get that distance and while its going to help you in all sorts of ways artistically, I think it also ends up being a handicap.

Fortunately Claudia and Mary exhibit a natural, cautious, internalized contempt / pity when dealing with these men. As Tommy's low rent seduction continues his character *suddenly* slips into a haze of alcoholic euphoria and he mumbles and tugs at Claudia hounding her for a date, “I'd like to take you out. I'm high now we'll have a good time.” Mackenzie cuts away to the jukebox, cuts back to Tommy who launches into an *improvisational* dance routine:

**Sean Axmaker:** Oh lookit, this is just amazing, this dancing like this. He's a cool guy.

**Sherman Alexie:** Y'know, one of the things too, is, is, y'know, when you use non-actors its always amazing to me how you can end up getting a performance like this that is not self conscious whatsoever. That's one of the gifts that a director does have, can have, is they way in which they can end up getting these non-professionals to be so good and, and to capture moments that an actor could never do. They're really are not self conscious in any way, and that really is a testament probably to how well he got to know them before the filming started, um, it, because it is so hard not to look self conscious on camera, to convince them not to act.

After the dance number Tommy entertains again with a *spontaneous* and perfectly timed piano bar routine complete with cutaways. Mackenzie says himself that they had less than two minutes of film to work with so they choreographed the scene and shot it with seconds to spare. Big questions surround Tom Reynolds and especially the character that he plays. Why did Mackenzie upon discovering that Tommy was not an Indian continue to portray him as one of the prominent Indian characters? Did Reynolds misrepresent himself to Mackenzie in the first place? Maybe Mackenzie had his suspicions about Tom Reynolds' ethnicity but needed a ringer, Indian or no, to be the glue that held his image of urban Indians up to scrutiny. Not only was Tom "Tommy" Reynolds revealed to be a Mexican, but before *The Exiles* was filmed Tom Reynolds was a Hollywood actor with these films under his belt, *Fright* (1956), as the City Editor, Bill, *Mr. Citizen* (TV Series) – Episode: Second Class Citizens, *Niagara* (1953), husband, uncredited, and *Dark Passage* (1947), hotel clerk,

uncredited. If Mackenzie did make a pact with Tommy to be an agent of instigation, were any of the Thunderbirds aware of it? They would've had to be, they would've known if there were a stranger in midst. Tom could've also been assimilated into the group just as Kent and his crew had – over time.

#### At the Columbine Bar

Claudia and Mary aren't the average go-along girl types and their reaction to the behavior of the men is or seems to be genuine, but also their reaction has the feel of a directed hand, those women are subdued. Was Mackenzie actually trying to exaggerate that appearance to reinforce the idea that native women no matter how independent they would like to be they will always cave in and submit to aggressive boozy losers. The single, brave, adventurous working women taking charge were outside of the relocation program requirements because they were not married. The image of a docile and controllable female is a married female, this in mind we see Yvonne's character as lonesome and always, always, walking and window shopping alone.

Homer is the only male character that asserts his real inner warrior and even then it was Mackenzie who pushed his button. Alexie and Axmaker comment that Homer is easy going all through the movie and then snaps. He is the quintessential demi-character, believable at reliving the living the past and good with improvisation; however, in reliving memories Homer is re-evaluating those experiences in the context of lessons or insights gleaned over time. I think that's why Homer walked off the set that night, because at that moment at the

Columbine, for Homer the fight was real and when he walked away it was for good.

Mackenzie knew Homer's trigger, he knew what would push Homer into losing his composure in an unbridled drunken rage. Mackenzie needed Homer to react in such a way to prove his theory of confusion. Mackenzie was sneaky about the nights shooting at the Columbine; using a poker chip system, the crew baited the non-actors into participating in a giant brew fest, under the following condition, no one tell Homer who is coming in later. It may have been a chance to drink for free but what Mackenzie offered to the onscreen talent that night was blood money. And they sold their souls to Mackenzie for bottles of beer.

In my mind what happened next is the first truth in that entire film, a base animal response to a real life threat – not just to Mackenzie's plant but to the director himself as well. Watch Homer stare down the camera after he leaves the Columbine, scary. Mackenzie said that it was an incident that would've happened anyway – even without planting Homers nemesis into a drunken situation. Once again the DVD commentary feature corresponding to the bar scene where Homer is sitting at a booth all alone, fiddling with a beer bottle:

**Sean Axmaker:** And Homer in particular never seems to be, he never gets settled anywhere, he's at the bar for just a beer and already he wants to get out of there, and, uh he's always on the move always trying to get to a new place . . . his expression is really, y'know i-its not neutral, he seems real unsettled about all this. I mean its almost as if he feels a bit ashamed of it but at the same time he

can't help but, uh, that's just what he's used to doin'. So what is that expression he has on his face there?

**Sherman Alexie:** It's unreadable

**Sean Axmaker:** He is unreadable most of the time, he, when he smiles its almost like its a reflex like that's what you do among a group of people.

**Sherman Alexie:** This movie is filled with unresolved tensions, which makes audiences very uncomfortable, certainly now, if you've grown up, my generation certainly. Now as a young person, mainstream art there are no unresolved tensions.

**Sean Axmaker:** Now this is an odd scene, he gets pretty aggressive, he seems to get a little angry, a little wrought up in this scene. Now he's left his buddies, he's off by himself now. There's a loner streak in him, you're right about unresolved tensions, something really bothering him. And he's been really easy going all through the film, he really seems unhappy about were he is in life right now, disconnected. Picked a fight for no reason at all.

When Homer finally did come back almost a year later he was changed but Mackenzie used him in the final scene on Hill X anyway. "When Homer first gets out of the car his smile seemed genuine," said Sean Axmaker. Up on that hill something happened that Mackenzie could not control. Perhaps that is why he referenced the event as another Custer's Last Stand, not because he had to bring in extra security to protect the booze supplies as he said in his thesis, but because once the drum began, its power and that of the people was so

overwhelming that even Mackenzie jumped into the frame out of sheer excitement! This was the one documentary moment of this film and the second truth shown; it was later ruined in the editing room by Mackenzie when he inserted the make believe fist fight and the comedic cutaway shot of Ricco hiding behind the bumper reaching out to rescue a bottle of T-bird from under dusty scuffling feet.

Michael Chanan wrote “in the first flush of postmodernist thought, skeptics and doubters were widely given to disparaging documentary on the grounds that its claims to authenticity rested on what was no more than an illusion of objectivity - and objectivity, it seemed, was no longer what it used to be, but rather another form of subjectivity. Hence it was said that documentary was actually biased and manipulative, and really just another form of fiction.”<sup>33</sup>

According to the Mackenzie *Ex-files*, Homer returned because he understood what Mackenzie was trying to do. Perhaps, but also consider that Homer’s return reflected his commitment to holding up his end of the bargain, to see the project through, to prove that he was an honorable man even without the feathers. Homer’s smile may have been his reaction to reuniting with old friends in a familiar place that they used to call their own. Not only had Mackenzie violated its sanctity, but also the bulldozing of this sacred mound (sacred in relation to that time and that place and for those people particularly) was the ultimate price of exploitation.



## Chapter 4, What *The Exiles* means today

MacKenzie [*sic*] doesn't try to pretend that his subjects are saints. The men manhandle their women, get into fights, and seem to go out of their way to avoid paying a check. But MacKenzie poeticizes their lapses, and lets all the wandering and carousing culminate in a haunting climactic scene, in which dozens of Native Americans gather on Hill X after the bars close, to beat drums and drink until they fall into an ecstatic stupor.<sup>34</sup>

Noel Murray, *The A.V. Club*

There is something unsettling about Kent Mackenzie's pronunciation of the "Drunken Indian" archetype and the stark and dangerous indictment of the Indian male in *The Exiles*. Native and non-native critics and audiences all agree that *The Exiles* is a significant artifact, that Mackenzie was genius, that the film accurately represents Indians, in a sympathetic light, frybread face and all. This same affirmation is also echoed in the endorsement by author Sherman Alexie.

Film critics consistently note two prominent features of *The Exiles* as its visual style and its drunken Indians. Amy Taubin reviewing the film for Art Forum magazine wrote, "I could not help but notice that what was on the screen was in fact a bunch of drunken Indians - not Indians acting drunk and pawing at women but, well, the real thing, aided and abetted by the film's director. I didn't need to read in the production notes that "8% of the budget went for alcohol" to understand what I was seeing. *The Exiles* was an attempt to depict a marginalized subculture - the Indians of the relocation period, ten years before the civil rights movement gave birth to the concept of Native pride - barely surviving in a city where they had hoped to find a better life."<sup>35</sup>

In his thesis Mackenzie concluded that: Although no Indian has ever denied the accuracy of the film, a number of Indians have been very concerned about it's effect on the average non-Indian. They are afraid that it will promote the stereotype of the "drunken, lazy Redman," and they feel it should not be shown unless more footage is put with it to explain that all Indians do not live this way. On the other hand it has been endorsed by a number of prominent and socially conscious American Indians as "the most accurate film ever made about contemporary American Indian life," and "a film that every American youth should see." The more experience that they have had with life on Main Street themselves, the better they seem to like the film.<sup>36</sup> Matthew Fleischer interviewed one of *The Exile's* cinematographers in 2008, John Morrill used to teach film at USC in the '90s, "When I showed my students the film, many of them told me it was racist. They thought it was stereotyping drunk Indians." Fleischer added that even Thom Andersen, whose regard for the film helped to launch its rediscovery, seems to accept at face value the pallor of fatalism, calling *The Exiles* "a movie about drunk Indians and the women they mistreat or neglect."<sup>37</sup>

Behaviors and disease such as alcoholism, drug abuse, disrespect, exploitation and violence curse American society, White Man's Burden. In Western genre films alone, a common sight are the dusty dirty white men lining wooden bars, up to their elbows in whiskey and whores, but let an Indian step past the swinging doors and who's the drunk now? Mackenzie's film profits from the same characterizations that promulgates negative representation of Indians

in film and video. Still, Rob Schmidt, an Indian Country Today correspondent who describes himself as a “white, Anglo-Saxon guy from California who's been interested in multicultural and Native American issues for years,” wrote about *The Exiles* in 2009 that, “Writer Sherman Alexie has championed it as a realistic portrayal of urban Indians,” Schmidt believes that *The Exiles* is arguably one of the greatest films ever by or about Native people, “A couple of critics have complained that the drunken Indians are stereotypical. But of the three main characters, only Tommy is an outright drunk.”<sup>38</sup> That is some small comfort. But who is this champion of *The Exiles* Sherman Alexie and why does his voice matter? A Google search (October 2011) revealed 66 web pages, worth 1,020,000 results. Sherman Alexie has a Twitter account. He takes his coffee in Seattle. He is the creative force behind *Smoke Signals* (1998), the Indian comedy based on his story “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven,” a film directed by Alexie’s buddy Chris Eyre. Alexie has the presence of a rock star and is popular within the academy, touring across the land reading poetry and telling stories. People want to touch him. He has received numerous awards for his Indian tales wherein alcohol figures prominently as a character in itself. Sitting in this position of influence as presenter for *The Exiles* re-release Sherman Alexie had the opportunity to begin the dialogue with audiences using this half - century artifact as a measure of how America defines Indians has or has not changed. Furthermore, what are the motivations behind the perpetuation of stereotypical Indian images, and why it is important to decolonize narratives that diminish Indigenous presence. Which is why it seems odd that Alexie’s

response to *The Exiles* was so accepting, so superficial and unchallenging. Somewhere in the world some thoughtless creature will say that since Sherman Alexie, an Indian of some note, didn't find anything unsettling about *The Exiles* then neither should any other Indian.

In 2008 Matthew Fleischer a writer for LA Weekly went looking for “the ghosts of Bunker Hill” and wrote, “Celebrated Indian author Sherman Alexie, however, is skeptical of any wider cultural impact *The Exiles* could have on the Indian world. “I doubt most Indians will pay much attention,” he says. Nonetheless, Alexie, who, together with African-American filmmaker Charles Burnett, is credited as a presenter of *The Exiles* reissue, is delighted a film has come along that captures the urban Indian life. “Far too many Indians and non-Indians see the creation of a new culture as the death of the old one,” Alexie says. “This is beautiful strife. The film is honest. Life is painful and these characters are suffering. That’s not stereotype, it’s realism.”<sup>39</sup>

Audiences should pay attention to the manifestation of Mackenzie’s disillusionment with “The Indian” demonstrated through the reduction of urban Indian Relocates characters to Thunderbird wine swilling caricatures. Considering that Mackenzie had two storyline options before him, why did Mackenzie chose to show this particular cross-section of exiled Indians – the title alone evokes the worst – Fleisher also spoke with Hanay Geiogamah, playwright, director and historian who noted, “The one thing about *The Exiles* is that the title implies these folks are somehow banished or disconnected from their home. But

a lot of [Native] people came here on their own accord. They prospered here. This is their home.”<sup>40</sup>

Mackenzie had two urban Indian stories available to him, the first being one of self-determination, hard work and perseverance, and the second, a story about self-destruction. Was Mackenzie disillusioned with Indians for failing to embody the mystical qualities of a gentler race? Mackenzie's primary source thesis material explains his goal and motivations and gives a sense of the paternity he developed from this process. But in the end it wasn't his intention to improve the lives of Indigenous peoples or to support the empowerment and sovereignty of tribes. He was not concerned with the protection of Indigenous intellectual property rights, accurate images and portrayals of Indigenous identity, culture and language retention, or keeping ceremony free from misappropriation.

The question is not whether the film is a technological masterpiece but whether the images and message it espouses is detrimental to the cultural identity of a group of consistently misrepresented people. *The Exiles* is only an authentic representation of the distillation of a three-year period in a community that was in constant flux and terminal upheaval, a place where existing in stasis was impossible. And while Mackenzie may have consulted with the Indians he featured in the film or Indians of that community there is no evidence that speaks to a full and equitable collaborative partnership between them. Ultimately *The Exiles* is evidence of Mackenzie's single-minded pursuit of constructing Indians. The brutal imagery and content of *The Exiles* took 1960's audiences off guard, audiences who were not ready to see modern Indians living in a city, nary a

feather between them. Even at the Robert Flaherty Seminar in Puerto Rico it was unofficially considered too negative.<sup>41</sup> Just over fifty years later Mackenzie's filmic representation of the American Indian urban experience codify for audiences the value of Indians as objects of commodification, stereotype and subjects of ethnographic study. Mackenzie may not have been alone in the process of constructing, nonetheless this exposition of the Native American condition is a narrative determined by the voice of one man. And sitting in Mackenzie's camp is the twenty-first century Indian representative, the presenter of this artifact, Sherman Alexie who offers no responding voice of decolonization to this document.

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*The Exiles*, The Gas Station scene - a transcription of DVD commentary

**Sean Axmaker:** I love this scene

**Sherman Alexie:** See, once again, I just thought this, I guarantee you, this is the first time there was a, a motion picture image of Indians getting gas! Y'know, there's Indians in khaki's getting gas.

**Sean Axmaker:** Uh, well there's Tommy, just given his whole life philosophy

**Sherman Alexie:** Yeah, well, y'know. You hear that, I think of my dad, legendary conversation we had when I was 8 or 9 and me trying to get him to sober up, y'know, to stay away from nights like this, months like this, and uh, I remember vividly – vividly – him, him looking at me drunkenly and saying, y'know, y'know, I drink because I'm Indian. That, that the alcoholism had become

cultural, become as much a part of our DNA as, as, drums, or, or, y'know, the land, that drinking itself because we had become so good at it, eh, ah, it had become what we do, that the act of drinking itself had become Indigenous. And, and its still the case, y'know, in our tribes among our people, that, that drinking, y'know you think about the wine tasting, you think about all those sort of things, about the role that alcohol plays in all of our lives but its something entirely different inside the Indian world where people will turn it into a sacred act, uh, even a political statement? Y'know, I think of, y'know, Indians who so don't want to belong, who so not want not to be part of the culture that drinking ends up becoming a way of doing that, being an alcoholic is a way of declaring your sovereignty, it a way of, y'know, declaring your separateness, that Che ran around the mountain shooting at people, but y'know, an Indian performed the same revolutionary act by drinking themselves to a point where they are unable to be a part of society.

## Notes

1. Max Goldberg, San Francisco Bay Guardian
2. For one example, see Sherman Alexie's audio interview included with the film DVD. He recounts seeing a bootleg copy of *The Exiles* on a visit to a university.
3. <http://notcoming.com/features/thomandersoninterview>
4. Kent Mackenzie. "A Description and Examination of *The Exiles*: A Film of the Actual Lives of a Group of Young American Indians". MA thesis University of Southern California Graduate School June 1964, pages 35/46)
5. Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Treaties: The History of a Political Anomaly*, University of California Press. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London. 1994, pages 226-229.
6. *Indian Country Diaries*, Native American Public Telecommunications. Published September 2006.
7. Rosenthal, Nicholas. 2005. *Americanization to Self-determination: Federal Relocation and American Indian Experiences in the City*. University of California, Los Angeles, page 83: Charles Miller to All Field Relocation Officers, 3 February 1956, Folder – Relocation Services Eligibility Requirements, 1957-58, Box 12, Los Angeles Field Office, NARA, PR.
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